



Did You Know?



FAMILY SERVICES NEWSLETTER
Mandala Children's House • Anne Kangas, L.C.S.W.

Pressured Learning Does NOT Work!

ASK YOURSELF... Does this activity truly meet my *child's* needs... Or does it fulfill *my* need to have a first-rate child?

Hurried children. High Achievers. Super-kids. All over America, children are under siege to learn and perform at a higher pace. Nowhere is this more evident than here in Silicon Valley, where parents feel they must race to give their children every "extra" necessary to guarantee success.

Competitiveness and pressured achievement are at an unparalleled high. Childhood is all but disappearing from our American culture! This push to learn can place extraordinary (and unnecessary) stress on young children. Whether the push is in sports, academics, or the arts (music/ dance), children are expected to *do more and more* at an earlier age.

WHY DOESN'T IT WORK?

■ **The pressured child must rush through critical stages of development or skip them all together.** All widely accepted theories of child development have stages that a child must pass through. Each stage builds on the skills and abilities gained in the stage that comes before it. Pressuring children does not allow a child to develop in this natural way. It does not give a child the time he absolutely MUST have to develop critical skills, so he or she may completely miss developing some skills altogether.

The fact that most children are not developmentally ready to read conventional material until at least age six has been lost in the hype surrounding early reading programs and the advertising of preschools that claim to teach early reading.

■ **Pressure interferes with the development of the intellect.** Creativity and higher levels of abstract thinking are severely jeopardized. Many schools and parents engage in forced learning, but this has limited value. "Well intentioned parents may unwittingly short-circuit the pathways to skill development by forcing learning," writes Jane Healy, author of *Your Child's Growing Mind*. Research shows that children can indeed learn to perform tasks from rote, but they do not gain a deep, transferable understanding of what they are doing. They do not learn to creatively solve problems on their own. The authors of *Einstein Never Used Flashcards* assert that "reciting and memorizing will produce 'trained seals' rather than creative thinkers."

■ **Early learners show marked decreases in later learning ability, while their slower peers will eventually catch up and pass them on.** One long-term study on reading skills showed that the child who started earlier has an initial advantage on reading tests, but this advantage disappeared by the time the children were in fourth grade (David Elkind, *The Hurried Child*). Another study showed that pressured children who increased in IQ dramatically during the first ten years lost much of their advantage thereafter (Robert McCall, *Parents Magazine*). Moreover, IQ and other test scores provide a narrow view of intelligence in the 21st century. Creativity and independent thinking, argue learning specialists, are the true 21st-century skills (Dr. Hirsh-Pasek et al).

■ **The pressured child may be damaged because he is forced to use brain matter that is not yet ready to be used.** During the first years of a child's life, massive brain development is taking place. The over-eager parent who pushes his child can damage the still-forming brain. Forcing skills by intensive instruction can cause

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"Trying to speed learning over unfinished neuron systems might be somewhat akin to racing a limousine over a narrow path in the woods. You can do it, but neither the car nor the path end up in very good shape! Moreover, the pressure which surrounds such learning situations may leave permanent emotional debris."
(J. Healy)

the child to use immature and inappropriate neural networks, which distorts the natural growth process of the brain.

■ **Pressured children will attempt to please their parents but this can be dangerous.** Being pushed beyond their developmental readiness presents an emotional challenge for a child, because *all* children want to please their parents. A child's survival literally hinges on the kind of relationship he has with his parents. "Failure" can be intolerable to children in pressured learning situations, because they not only feel the shame of not learning the task, but they fear letting down their parent and damaging that crucial relationship.

"There is an order in which learning is programmed to take place.

While it can be encouraged, it need not be forced."

(H. Gardner)

■ **Children need to experience success in order to enjoy tasks they are performing.** Children do best in school when they have an enthusiasm for learning. They develop this when they have repeated experiences of success and mastery ("*I did it myself!*"). Children who are pressured to learn things too early do not experience the pure joy of learning for their own inner satisfaction. Sadly for them, learning is experienced more as stress and the pressure of unmanageable expectations.

■ **Childhood development is a process, not a product.** It follows a time table of its own and cannot be rushed. In our society which respects "products" more than the processes of creation, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that we have to DO more. All children will learn when they are ready. Our job is to follow a child's lead and trust the process.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF PRESSURE?

CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN HURRIED CARRY SCARS.

Trying to accelerate a child's development puts a child at risk for long-term negative effects. Unfortunately, these problems do not always show themselves right away. Psychological damage is particularly slow to be uncovered. Many pressured children are adolescents before emotional problems become apparent.

Some consequences...

■ **Early problems: sleep disturbances, fear of failure, stubbornness, refusing to be pushed any more.** Pressured children can make learning, (or *not* learning) their "barricade" by refusing to cooperate. Other early problems may manifest as addiction to television, depression, a sense of uselessness, or general anxiety and stress.

■ **Pseudo –Independence.** Children who are overly pressured must deny their legitimate dependency needs. They must become self-sufficient too early. They often look like "little adults," but they pay a terrible price for their pseudo-maturity. One teacher commented that her fourth graders "act like tired businessmen, instead of like children."

■ **Lack of loyalty or commitment to parents, rebellion, criminal activity and suicide.** By adolescence, we start to see these behaviors surface in children who have been pressured, hurried, and rushed through childhood.

■ **Premature use of sex and drugs and adult play.** The child who has been denied a childhood or who suffers from play deprivation is likely to be involved with "adult play" at an early age. Pressured children lose a childhood centered on free-time play. Instead, they have a childhood resembling the style of adulthood: purposeful, success-centered, and competitive.

■ **Diminished Social Skills.** Because they are expected to be 'ahead' of their peers, these children are often competitive and self-centered in their peer relationships. They are perceived as rude and ill-mannered. The real truth is that they do not know how to treat people or how to get along with them.

■ **Health problems.** Joint or bone trauma is most common, often preventing future participation in sports or dance. Young children complain of stomach aches and "feeling sick" when they are stressed or over whelmed.

■ **Over-dependence on adults for guidance and direction.** Children who are coached or instructed in formal, achievement-oriented ways tend to be unable to think for themselves. They do not get the opportunity to develop a firm sense of independence or autonomy. As a result, they are not secure in their own ability to choose. Instead, they look outward to others for answers.

■ **Emotional Burn-out.** Sometimes, burn-out shows itself when children reach the point of refusing to play the game, refusing to practice, or refusing to do their school work, and no one can make them do it. Ultimately, they rebel against the pressuring and stress. Most tragic of all are the children who completely give up on school and academics, having lost all interest in pursuing college or higher education because they “just don’t care anymore.”

“Play is to early
childhood as gas
is to a car.”

(From *Einstein Never Used
Flashcards*)

Childhood is a vitally important time. It must never be considered wasted time. The child is growing and learning according to inner leadings. No one can change these leadings. To deny them is to deny the child a part of his life.”

(Jane Rust)

THE MONTESSORI METHOD IS A NON-PRESSURED APPROACH

The Montessori Method was set up to teach children without pressure and the damage it causes. Montessori works with each child as an individual. It recognizes the needs of the “sensitive periods” and the pull of a child’s “inner directives.” The classroom is set up to interest the child, to allow him freedom to move and work, and to fulfill the natural urges of his childhood development.

- **Montessori does not advocate accelerated learning.** Maria Montessori saw that each child passes through definite stages of development and understood that each stage is important. A child will naturally focus on the area that he or she needs to develop in each particular stage.
- **Social and life skills are an important part of a Montessori education.** Good manners, respect, and courtesy are emphasized in the Montessori classroom. Children learn to interact with others and how to solve problems. They learn how to take care of things and take care of themselves. In this way, children develop *true* independence, as opposed to pseudo-independence.
- **The materials themselves are designed for young children.** They are stimulating to the senses. They teach fine movement and muscular coordination. Work is never done by rote. All work (activity) is designed to bring success to a child. Most importantly, it is the child’s *work* itself (not the product!) that is important in the Montessori classroom.
- **The emphasis is on the child and his work, not the teacher or the schedule.** Rather than adults viewing a child a “something empty that needs to be filled,” Montessori stresses that the child has an inner guide that the adult must follow. The goal is to “follow the lead of the child” and encourage the development of the child’s own personality.

STOP! REFLECT, RESIST, RE-CENTER

The next time you feel the pull of parental guilt--or the pressure from your peers around you--stop and take a moment to step back. Reflect on what your child *really* needs at this time in his or her life. Before you cart your child to another sports activity, a second school, an arts program, or an extra-curricular lesson, think about the consequences of “pressured learning.” Before you purchase another computer game to accelerate learning, before you buy preschool clothing designed for teens, ask yourself what you are racing your child towards...and what the goal is. Resist choices that do not meet your child’s true *developmental* needs. Re-center yourself. Focus on what matters most. Your child needs you to be content with YOU...and the freedom to grow into “ME”!

Undue PRESSURE to excel or perform does not benefit the child. It only serves to fulfill some need of the parent.

WHAT DO CHILDREN REALLY NEED?

In bringing up healthy, creative and self-assured youngsters, the amount of time and money spent by parents is not the important thing.

What matters is how the parents themselves are in life.

Most significant in successful parenting is that parents feel good about their own lives, that they serve as resources for their children, and that they give them the emotional space necessary to become what they may be.

(From a study by Burton White)

WANT TO READ MORE?

Here are some good books on young children and what they need for optimal learning:

The Whole-Brain Child by Daniel Siegel, M.D. and Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.

Einstein Never Used Flash Cards: How Our Children Really Learn--And Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less by Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Diane Eyer, and Roberta Golinkoff.

The Hurried Child by David Elkind

Your Child's Growing Mind--A Practical Guide to Brain Development and Learning from Birth to Adolescence by Jane Healy, Ph.D.

Endangered Minds—Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It by Jane Healy.

A Mind At A Time by Mel Levine, M.D.

This article was drawn from *Pressured Learning Does Not Work* by Jane Rust, **Montessori Reporter, VOL XXL**; Jane Healy, *Your Child's Growing Mind*; Dr. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek et al, *Einstein Never Used Flashcards*.

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